

WHERE THE MONEY ISN'T GOING

The Wild Turkey Fund was established in 1977 from revenue derived from the sale of a special turkey hunting license. It is restricted to be used for scientific research, biological survey work on Wild Turkeys and turkey management.

If we are to manage for any wildlife species it is imperative that the necessary habitat requirements for their survival be provided. An example is the Kirtland's Warbler, an avian species that was on the brink of extinction. They require a certain age class of jackpine, in a specific density, with an acreage requirement per bird.

Key Wild Turkey habitat ingredients as specified by the DNR are trees, shrubs and grass in close proximity to each other. Grassy openings supply an abundance of insects, seeds and other foods for adults and especially for poults.

When the turkey fund was established there was a commitment to the turkey hunters that if they would buy a special license it would be used to manage Wild Turkeys throughout the state. If Wild Turkeys are to be managed as the law requires then the DNR is required to establish and manage the critical key habitat requirements of the Wild Turkey throughout the entire state.

As far back as over a quarter century ago we discovered the huge blocks of mast producing hardwoods on our state forests were absent of Wild Turkeys. One of the key habitat ingredients of managed, grassy wildlife openings were non existent. As we inquired from field biologists why wildlife openings were not being created a common answer was given that there was no money. No money? That is exactly what the turkey fund was established for. So where was and is the money going? This began several decades of being stone walled in an attempt to find out.

Finally in 2005 we were able to get a peek at the 2002 turkey fund expenditures as the Natural Resources Commission was reviewing all of the restricted funds, then the door closed again. Since the establishment of the turkey fund in 1977 millions of dollars have been spent on 400,000 acres of state game areas in southern Michigan and virtually nothing has gone to the 3.9 million acres of state forests.

During the 2002 period \$2,533,071 was spent. Expenditures went for parking lots and gates, herbaceous planting, opening maintenance. \$429,981 was spent on stream bank stabilization on private property and \$872,144 spent on turkey habitat acquisition, all in southern Michigan. We monitor all of the Natural Resources Commission meetings and never was the Turkey Fund listed as providing funds for land purchases.

The Turkey Fund did indeed fund these land purchases but under another name. It took some time to get the criteria of these purchases and not one mentioned Wild Turkey. River, stream and lake frontage was included as the purchase of 15 acres including a 2 story house, 3 car garage and barn for \$250,000, which later had to be torn down probably using the Turkey Fund. Obviously, under the guise of turkey management the DNR has used our license dollars as a slush fund with virtually nothing being returned to our state forests.

On advising private landowners how to manage their land for Wild Turkey the DNR advises that 5 percent should be in managed grassy openings. This should be true for our hardwood state forest lands. In partnership with the Michigan Conservation Foundation the MWTFA examined a comparison of managed grassy openings in various state forest management units inventories for treatment in 2006. It doesn't make much difference if it is 2006, 1996 or 2010 it is the same situation.

It must be remembered that forest openings are critical habitat for a great number of wildlife species, from deer to insects. So is DNR management providing these? As an example of the forest compartment inventories, Pigeon River Country 12,114 acres with 20 openings totaling 121 acres, Gladwin 20,218 acres with 2 managed openings totaling 19 acres, Cadillac 24,336 acres with 2 managed openings totaling 24 acres, Roscommon 24,001 acres with 10 managed openings totaling 119 acres, etc.

For the first time the DNR Wildlife Division submitted to the public the Turkey Fund expenditures for 2010. A total of \$1,693,000 is appropriated. \$1,453,045 is allocated to 400,000 acres of state game areas, while \$239,955 is allocated to 3.9 million acres of state forests through out northern Michigan. Very little is actually going to reach the ground of our state forests.

Several years ago the U.S. Forest Service contracted with Michigan State University to conduct a study of the recreational use of the Huron-Manistee National Forest. The number one use was found to be hunting. During their planning of the 2006 Huron-Manistee plan the USFS stated that 35 percent of licensed hunters in Michigan hunted on national forest lands. Michigan State University acknowledged the same is true for out state forests. It would seem logical that the DNR would be obligated to manage these 3.9 million acres for game birds and animals, however this is not the case.

Minimum habitat is not being provided and deer, grouse, woodcock, rabbit, hare and turkey. Their numbers are suppressed on our state forests. As recently as 1992 Michigan had 1,171,721 hunters. In 2008 there were 790,789. We have lost 380,932 hunters during that time. We have lost a third of our hunters during that time period.

Southern Michigan is one huge tract of Wild Turkey habitat with it's agriculture and wood lots, controlled by private land owners. Development and sprawl is eating wildlife habitat. Unless one can afford to lease hunting land or has a relative who does, access is very difficult. The future of hunting in Michigan is dependent on our public forests. The lack of game on our state forests is reflected in the alarming loss of our hunters.

Over the years we have met with a series of DNR Wildlife Division chiefs, staff, with DNR Directors and have testified many times before the Natural Resources Commission only to fall on deaf ears. It appears that the only recourse we have is to seek legislation that will mandate the distribution and use of the fund. What a shame!

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